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ABSTRACT

Examining the relationships among social motivations, media use, and levels of political knowledge, a study (1) measured the unique contribution of social motivations beyond simple exposure and individual motivations, (2) tested for interactions between social and individual motivations and public affairs exposure, and (3) examined the interactive relationships among the variables. Telephone interviews with 737 adults determined the perceived influence of mass media exposure on family, friends, and co-workers. These three social motivation types allowed the relationship between individual media patterns and the possible social motivations for those patterns to be examined. Findings showed that, although traditional individual level predictors were a significant influence, social level predictors should be taken into account when an individual's knowledge levels are being considered. Group interactions provided a significant control for all other variables. Results also indicated that the relationship between social and individual motivations is substantially additive and that public affairs exposure interacts with social influences. In addition, while increased public affairs exposure showed no corresponding increase in knowledge, findings showed that the media were able to transfer substantial amounts of information at lower motivation levels. Motivation, then, was the overall best predictor of knowledge. (Supplementary tables and appendixes are included.) (JD)

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# The Interaction of Social Motivation, Attention and Interest, and Public Affairs Media Use on Political Knowledge Holding

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The Interaction of Social Motivation, Attention and Interest, and Public Affairs Media Use on Political Knowledge Holding

This study examines some social- and individual motivations on political knowledge holding. The sample survey, multiple regression design uses indices of the perceived influence of three social groups (family, friend and co-workers) finding a significant contribution of these groups for knowledge above the contribution for traditional individual-level predicters. Further, this paper examined the interactions between the social motivators and two other predicters of knowledge--attention/interest and public affairs media use. The interactions as a group provided a significant contribution controlling for all other variables. Finally, a further examination attempts to explain what the interactions mean within this context.

In some ways the power of a medium or the media is mute in an information rich society such as ours. Given a sufficient level of interest to warrant the expenditure of time and money a person of even modest education can gather much of the available information on a given topic. Computer searches can even today give more citations than one can practically use. Given this assumption, an individual's motivations for information become a governing factor for the type and amount of information that a person might hold. These motivations, then, bear exploration.

Blumler (1979) argued that researchers should look to the antecedents of motives and suggested three areas of <u>social motivation</u>: 1) socially influenced norms; 2) social interactions; 3) the subjective influence of the situation causing adjustment or reaction.

Chaffee (1972) and others have noted that the individual's use of mass media and the interaction of that individual with others cannot be totally isolated from each other. Chaffee notes that "In a very real way, a principal social function of the mass media may be to facilitate interpersonal discussion."

Chaffee and McLeod (1973) present evidence that there is a positive relationship between discussion of politics and the seeking of political information. They speculate that not only may the information serve for uncertainty reduction, but it may also

> "arm" [the individual] with partisan arguments (either to invoke for his own candidate, or refute the opposition) to use in interpersonal discussion.

p. 243

Further they note that individuals who report similar levels of interest in the campaign to their friends requested information more often then when individuals reported more or less interest than their friends. That "like talks to like" has been, according to Chaffee (1972), been demonstrated often enough. Increased similarity leading to increased information pursuit and hence, one would expect to increased levels of knowledge holding.

Shaw (1977) and others have demonstrated a similar high correlation between exposure to public affairs media and discussion of political ideas in an agenda setting context.

> 1. If the orientational need exists, information seeking follows.
> 2. The need for more information (currently the most common interpretation of "need for orientation") is strengthened by the perceived utility of information seeking.
> 3. Anticipated involvement in discussions on a particular subject with friends, co-workers, or family members provides such an incentive for seeking more information, especially if one is accustomed to or intends to join actively in the conversations. All of us want to be knowledgeable, or appear so.
> 4. If the interpersonal exchanges relate to public matters, the principal and most accessible source for such information in the technologically more advanced nations--Pye's "modern societies"--is the press.
> p. 79

If one reason for an increased likelihood of attending to and holding information is the expectation of needing it in an interpersonal context, then one would expect that the perceived relevance of certain groups of people for the individual could form an interaction with media resulting in higher levels of knowledge holding for the individual.

This paper will attempt to examine the impact of perceived interpersonal interaction on political knowledge holding over and above control and media predictors. Further it will seek any interactions that exist between these interpersonal predictors and media use variables.

The Social Variable

The measure of the individual's interaction or perceived interaction with others is the linchpin of this study. It's been argued that to best study interpersonal interactions, the networks themselves should be sampled (McLeod and O'Keefe, 1972). This is of course the desired way when the networks themselves are of interest. In this study, however, the primary concern is the motivations for the individual. For the individual, the aggregated group expectations are arguably less salient than the perceived expectations from the individuals point of view. It is then, the perceptions that are of concern here.

The next problem is how should the respondent be directed to "chunk up" the people with whom they interact. Groups defined by each individual may yield individually valid divisions but may make across individual comparisons difficult. Blumler (1979) argued that several factors make such a study difficult: 1) The problem of bringing disparate derivations of media needs under one theoretical umbrella (i.e. restricted work experience, geographical mobility, education, isolation); 2) Normally such an empirical endeavor is restricted to examining demographic variables; 3) Seldom have studies examined combinations and

interactions of influence; 4) Most speculations have regarded only certain gratifications associated with social position; and 5) Prior research has focused on environmental deprivations rather than on possible "positive interests and forces in the individual's life."

Socialization perspectives points toward the influence of peers. While family and school are primary socializers for children and adolescents, peer groups are the primary socializers for adults (Beck 1977; Silbiger 1977; Sigel and Hoskin 1977). The expectation would then be for more influence from peers than from the family. The literature on political socialization further suggests that peers comprise primarily two groups--co-workers and friends. One way, then, to chunk up the social connections would be by offering generic groups to the respondent: Family, Friends, Co-workers. Such divisions may obfuscate individual's actual social contacts, but may facilitate aggregate comparisons. Further, they would blur Blumler's social motivations of norms, interactions and situations.

Examining the social influences on political information holding must, of course, include controls. The relationship between political knowledge holding and individual demographics such as education, income and age have been well documented (Milbrath, 1965). More interesting individual relationships have been suggested between political knowledge holding and the individual's: 1) interest in politics; 2) attention to media information about politics; and 3) exposure to political

information (McLeod and Becker, 1974; Patterson, 1980). The social predictors would need to provide explanation beyond these individual predictors to be of real interest.

Beyond the additive nature of social influence one might expect interaction between social motivations and individual media habits and proclivities toward political information. One might expect that different levels of social motivations might interact with individual motivations to produce effects beyond additive effects. Whether gratification effects are additive or interactive has been an area of research concern. Blumler and McQuail (1969) found combined effects of exposure and motivation to be different from what one would expect from the addition of their effects. McLeod and Becker (1974), and elsewhere with others, presented data that showed few interactions and instead supported an additive approach.

To examine whether interactions were present between even the few individual and social predictors here is a large undertaking. To simplify the process, factor analysis was employed to attempt to identify any hypothetical variables present among the individual predictors. In this manner interactions between individual and social predictors might be more efficiently examined.

Methods

Telephone interviews with 737 adults in Dane County, Wisconsin, were conducted in October 1984 during the presidential campaign. The survey was conducted by trained graduate and

undergraduate students in an advanced research methods course, using random digit dialing procedures. The response rate was 72 percent. The mean age of the sample was 39; 39 percent had graduated from college.

Measurement of the dependent variable combined knowledge across three areas: 1) Identifying Mondale's and Reagan's positions on certain issues; 2) Identifying political actors and their political parties; 3) Identifying some international people and places in the news at that time (see appendix b).

SES as a control combines education and income. Age is also used as a demographic control.

Overall television and newspaper use were introduced to control effects from simply overall exposure.

To obtain a limited number of individual level controls eight variables were entered into a principal components factor analysis. An oblique rotation produced two factors. The data presented in Table 1 show that Attention and Interest load on the first factor, exposure to public affairs content on the second. The attention/interest variables were individual items, while the public affairs variables were indices (see appendix b).

The social group measure was an index including questions about each generic group's (Family, Friends, Co-workers) interest in politics, interest in the current political campaign, the similarity between the respondent's and the group's political views, the amount of political discussion with group members and a measure of how much the respondent perceived the group members

care about what the respondent knows about public affairs (see appendix a). In this way one could attempt to examine three socially derived influences for the individual while concentrating on one type of information. This approach does not allow differentiation among the three social motivation types that Blumler articulated. But summing across these motivations will allow further examination of the relationship between individual media patterns and possible social motivations of that use.

Hierarchical least-squares regression constituted the basic method of analysis (Cohen and Cohen, 1975). The demographic variables, SES and Age, were entered as the first block. The media controls, newspaper and television frequency, were entered as the second block. The factors representing individual attention/interest and public affairs exposure were entered next. The social variables, family, friend and co-workers, were entered in the fourth block where, with the other predictor variables acting as controls, the independent predictive power of these variables could be examined.

A final model included a fifth block of first-order interaction terms formed by multiplying each factor by each of the three groups. This block of variables will estimate the predictive power of interactions beyond the main effects. One would expect that there would be a positive addition for interactions between individual attention/interest and the social predictors. When both are high one might expect that the

individual would know more than one might predict from the main effects only.

The expectations for the interactions between the exposure factor and the social variables are somewhat less clear. At first blush one might predict that when both are high knowledge should be higher than from the main effects alone. But when the social context for the political information is high, it may preclude any effect above the main effect for public affairs exposure--a ceiling effect. The levels of information are already so high there may be little new information to learn. Similarly when there is a low expectation to need the information socially, exposure to public affairs content may not result in the level of processing needed to learn more than isolated or more visceral types of information. McLeod and McDonald (1985) found such negative interactions between Attention and Gratifications (surveillance and communication utility). The analysis here looks at the interactions as a set, so any attempt to interpret individual interactions must be done with great care.

Results

As expected there is a strong relationship between the Attention/Interest factor and Family and Friends. The association between Co-Workers and the first factor is less strong. The associations between the Public Affairs factor and the three social groups, however, are very weak. Younger people are associated with more influence from their Friends and

especially their Co-Workers, but Family correlation with Age is very low.

The correlations with knowledge are consistent with previous research showing strong associations for Attention/Interest and moderate associations for Public Affairs media. The three social group variables show moderate correlation with knowledge. The social groups are related to one another. This provides some evidence that individuals tend to associate with others who are in general similar to one another. To the extent that the groups are similar, one might expect even greater similarity between the individual and the groups, because of the additive influence among them. Family is strongly related to Friend, and Friend is strongly related to Co-Worker. Family and Co-Worker however show only moderate association.

The results of the regression analysis for political knowledge are shown in Table 4. The simple correlations in the left columns show that all variables except age begin with a significant relationship to knowledge. SES (education + income) shows the strong relationship one would expect with a final partial correlation of .27. The use of newspapers is again shown to be a strong predictor of knowledge. Television use is also a good indicator--though negatively--of knowledge. The two factors both show strong final partials, again showing strong relationships between an individual's motivations (attention and interest) and knowledge <u>and</u> between public affairs content and knowledge. The individual/media variables accounting for about

the same amount of variance as does the demographic predictors. The fourth block presents the equation with the social group variables in the final position. Here one can observe their unique contribution to the equation. While they contribute only 1.63 percent additional variance, it in the least advantageous position, and it is significant. Social motivations, as expected, account for significant variance in the individual's knowledge holding. The significant partial correlation for only Worker can probably be explain as multicollinearity among the social groups.

The intercorrelations among the social groups and the individual predicters demand that examination of interactions among these variables be done individually. Table 5 presents the zero-order and partial correlations for interactions entered two at a time. Each set was entered as a block, with controls for demographics, media exposure and communication factors and social group main effects. As expected partial relationships for interactions between the Attention/Interest factor and the social group are positive--though weak. Graphing the interactions allowed further examination of the relationships. To aid interpretation each of the social groups and the factors were collapsed into three levels (high, medium, and low). For the Attention/Interest factor the graphing showed evidence of a general linear trend across the levels for all groups. There was little difference among the lines except when social group influences were low. When group influence was the lowest, Family

influence showed a much steeper positive slope than did Friends and Co-Workers. Except these two relatively flat slopes, all the lines could be construed as virtually the same line. Overall then for each of the three levels of each social group, as Attention/Interest increased, so did levels of political knowledge. But the relationship between the internal predictors of interest and attention and the external or social motivations are primarily <u>additive</u> rather than primarily interactive. This supports the McLeod and Becker argument about the nature of these effects.

The interactions with the Public Affairs factor are more complex. All three of the interactions show significant contributions and all are negative. Again breaking the social groups and factors into three levels one can further examine the curves. A complex relationship emerges. At low levels of social group influence, there again appears a predominately positive linear slope. When examining social influence at the two higher levels the interaction become clear. The middle levels of the social motivation resemble a quadratic curve beginning slowly with an ever increasing vertical slope. The highest levels of social influence begin highest and rise quickly, but then plateau, causing an interaction at the highest levels of public affairs exposure. For public affairs and social motivation, then, individuals <u>learn</u> from increased exposure to public affairs content, but differently depending on the extent of social motivation. For people with little social influence, exposure

steadily increases knowledge levels. Individuals with moderate levels of influence need higher levels of exposure to show increased levels of knowledge, but then learn rapidly, reaching the overall highest levels of knowldge holding. Those with the highest levels of social motivation, begin with the highest knowledge levels. Moderate exposure to public affairs content substantially increases knowledge holding, but a ceiling effect is reached at highest levels of media exposure. Those with only moderate social motivation can achieve similar levels of knowledge when they attend to high levels of public affairs media content.

Conclusion

The objective was to further examine the relationship between social motivations and media use and levels of political knowledge holding. The multivariate strategy was three-fold: First to measure the unique contribution of social motivations beyond simple exposure and individual motivations (attention and interest); Second to test for interactions between social motivations and individual motivations and public affairs exposure; Third, to examine more closely the interactive relationships among the variables.

What can be learned from the results presented here?

First, it has been empirically demonstrated that social level predictors should be taken into account when one considers the individual's knowledge levels. Social motivations do make a

significant contribution to the knowledge levels that the individual maintains.

Second, the relationship between social and individual motivations appears to be substantially additive. Increasing either individual or social motivation results in higher levels of knowledge. Further study could help determine the causal order or reciprocity of causality between the individual and social predictors. Public affairs exposure interacts with social influences. When influence is lower, increased exposure will result in more knowledge. But a ceiling effect is reached at the highest levels of social influence where increased levels of public affairs exposure does not show a corresponding increase in knowledge. Motivations, then, are overall a better predictor of knowledge. But at lower levels of motivation, the media can transfer substantial amounts of information even to the less motivated.

Future research will further enlighten the relationships here. Other operationalizations of social motivations will increase the validity of these findings, as would research done longitudinally and in a non-political setting.

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Table 1

Principal Component Factor Analysis
Oblique Rotation

| | Pattern Matrix | | Structure Matrix | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Factor 1 | Factor 2 | Factor 1 | Factor 2 |
| Attention to Presidential Campaign | | | | |
| Newspapers | .81 | -.05 | .79 | .22 |
| Television | .83 | -.13 | .79 | .16 |
| Attention to National News | | | | |
| Newspapers | .60 | .27 | .69 | .48 |
| Television | .57 | .19 | .64 | .38 |
| Interest in: | | | | |
| Politics | .75 | .10 | .79 | .35 |
| Campaign | .85 | -.13 | .81 | .15 |
| Public Affairs Content | | | | |
| Newspapers | .33 | .60 | .54 | .71 |
| Television | -.10 | .88 | .20 | .84 |
| Eigenvalue | 3.87 | 1.01 | | |
| Percentage of Variance | 48.3 | 12.6 | | |

Table 2

Means and Standard Deviations for Dependent and Independent Variables

| | Mean | Deviation | N |
|---|---|---|---|
| Knowledge | 19.41 | 8.59 | 726 |
| **Social Groups** | | | |
| (A) Family | 29.56 | 11.41 | 736 |
| (B) Friend | 27.50 | 10.55 | 737 |
| (C) Worker | 18.95 | 14.67 | 737 |
| **Factors** | | | |
| (1) Attention/ Interest | 0.00 | 1.07 | 670 |
| (2) Public Affairs | 0.03 | 1.06 | 670 |
| **Interactions** | | | |
| Ax1 | 4.92 | 30.85 | 672 |
| Ax2 | 1.40 | 32.56 | 672 |
| Bx1 | 5.18 | 28.39 | 672 |
| Bx2 | 0.93 | 29.67 | 672 |
| Cx1 | 2.54 | 23.61 | 672 |
| Cx2 | 0.30 | 23.07 | 672 |
| **Frequency** | | | |
| Newspapers | 5.19 | 2.31 | 728 |
| Television | 2.42 | 1.62 | 737 |
| **Demographics** | | | |
| SES | 1.19 | 1.12 | 625 |
| Age | 39.11 | 15.94 | 728 |

Table 3

Zero-Order Correlations for
Dependent and Independent Variables

| | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) | (5) | (F1) | (F2) | (A) | (B) | (C) | (Ax1) | (Ax2) | (Bx1) | (Bx2) | (Cx1) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| (1) Knowledge | -- | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Demographics | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| (2) SES | 38 | -- | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| (3) Age | 06 | 00 | -- | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Frequency | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| (4) Newspapers | 23 | 15 | 26 | -- | | | | | | | | | | | |
| (5) Television | -17 | 13 | 10 | 00 | -- | | | | | | | | | | |
| Factors | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| (F1) Attention/ Interest | 30 | 22 | -03 | 11 | -10 | -- | | | | | | | | | |
| (F2) Public Affairs | 16 | 03 | 26 | 19 | 03 | 33 | -- | | | | | | | | |
| Social Group | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| (A) Family | 19 | 16 | -06 | 07 | -03 | 41 | 05 | -- | | | | | | | |
| (B) Friend | 27 | 19 | -20 | 04 | -11 | 46 | 01 | 46 | -- | | | | | | |
| (C) Co-Worker | 20 | 13 | -30 | 04 | -07 | 17 | -02 | 16 | 44 | -- | | | | | |
| Interactions | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Ax1 | 28 | 18 | -03 | 09 | -06 | 92 | -30 | 43 | 43 | 14 | -- | | | | |
| Ax2 | 13 | 04 | 29 | 20 | 00 | -27 | 94 | 04 | -00 | -02 | -29 | -- | | | |
| Bx1 | 31 | 21 | -06 | 09 | -10 | 92 | -29 | 38 | 46 | 18 | 91 | -26 | -- | | |
| Bx2 | 11 | 05 | 26 | 19 | 02 | -27 | 92 | 03 | 03 | 00 | -26 | 93 | -30 | -- | |
| Cx1 | 30 | 18 | -00 | 10 | -07 | 78 | -22 | 29 | 40 | 27 | 77 | -19 | 83 | -22 | -- |
| Cx2 | 10 | 07 | 16 | 17 | -01 | -22 | 78 | 03 | 04 | 05 | -21 | 78 | -23 | 84 | -27 |

Table 4

Correlation, Partial Correlation and Incremental $R^2$ for Complete Model

| | Block 5 Simple r | Block 5 Partial r | Block 4 Partial r | Block 3 Partial r | Block 2 Partial r | Block 1 Partial r |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Demographics | | | | | | |
| SES | .38 | .30[a] | .30[a] | .30[a] | .35[a] | .38[a] |
| Age | .02 | .04 | .03 | -.01 | .03 | .06 |
| $R^2$ | | 15.07[a] | | | | |
| Frequency | | | | | | |
| Newspapers | .23 | .12[a] | .12[a] | .12[a] | .18[a] | |
| Television | -.17 | -.13[a] | -.12[a] | -.13[a] | -.13[a] | |
| $R^2$ | | 4.23[a] | | | | |
| Factors | | | | | | |
| (1) Attention/ Interest | .30 | .08 | .23[a] | .30[a] | | |
| (2) Public Affairs | .16 | .20[a] | .21[a] | .23[a] | | |
| $R^2$ | | 8.27[a] | | | | |
| Social Group | | | | | | |
| (A) Family | .18 | -.03 | -.03 | | | |
| (B) Friend | .27 | .04 | .04 | | | |
| (C) Worker | .20 | .10[b] | .11[a] | | | |
| $R^2$ | | 1.35[b] | | | | |
| Interactions | | | | | | |
| Ax1 | .28 | .01 | | | | |
| Ax2 | .13 | -.03 | | | | |
| Bx1 | .31 | -.01 | | | | |
| Bx2 | .11 | -.07[b] | | | | |
| Cx1 | .30 | .04 | | | | |
| Cx2 | .10 | -.02 | | | | |
| $R^2$ | | 1.90[b] | | | | |
| Total $R^2$ | | 30.81% | | | | |
| Adj. $R^2$ | | 28.93% | | | | |

a = $p \leq .01$ b = $p \leq .05$

N = 570

Table 5

Interactions between Factor Predictors and Social Predictors
Zero-Order and Partial Correlations with Knowledge

| Interactions | Simple r | Partial r |
|---|---|---|
| Family | | |
| x Attention/Interest | .28 | .05 |
| x Public Affairs | .13 | -.10[a] |
| Friend | | |
| x Attention/Interest | .31 | .06[c] |
| x Public Affairs | .11 | -.14[a] |
| Co-Worker | | |
| x Attention/Interest | .30 | .07[c] |
| x Public Affairs | .10 | -.09[b] |

$R^2$ contribution when entered as 5th block 1.56[b]

---

a = p< .01
b = p< .05
c = p< .10

NOTE: Table entries for partial correlations coefficients controlling for demographic, communication factors and social group main effects (shown in Table 4).

Appendix a

(Discussion) a. We would like to know how often you discuss politics with others. Again, on a one to ten scale, where one is Never discuss politics and 10 is discuss politics VERY OFTEN, how often do you discuss politics with: your family; your friends; and (if appropriate) the people you work with.

(Care about Knowledge) b. On a one to ten scale, where one is NOT AT ALL and ten is VERY MUCH, how much would you say that your family; your friends; (if appropriate) people you work with; (if appropriate) the people you admire] cares about how much you know about politics?

(General Interest) c. We would like to know, in general, how interested you are in politics. On a one to ten scale, where one is NOT AT ALL interested and ten is VERY INTERESTED, how interested are [you; your family; your friends; (if appropriate) the people you work with; in politics?

(Campaign Interest) d. How about in this political campaign, if one is NOT AT ALL INTERESTED and ten is VERY INTERESTED, how interested are you; your family; your friends; (if appropriate) the people you work with; in this political campaign?

(View Similarity) e. On that same one to ten scale, where one is VERY DISSIMILAR and ten is VERY SIMILAR, how dissimilar or similar are your political views to: your family; your friends; (if appropriate) people you work with.

Individuals were screened for whether they worked. If they did not work outside of the home they were not asked any further questions about the people they worked with. All respondents were asked about family and friends. For each individual their groups scores were derived by summing across the questions pertaining to each group.

Alpha Coefficents for the groups (5 items)

Family = .86 Friend = .85

Worker = .94

## Appendix b

Reliability

Knowledge alpha = .88 (26 items)

Stances on Issues

| Reagan: | Mondale: |
|---|---|
| ERA | ERA |
| Deficit | Deficit |
| Taxes | Taxes |
| Abortion | Abortion |
| School Prayer | School Prayer |
| Nuclear Weapons | Nuclear Weapons |

Naming:

| | |
|---|---|
| Senator | Party |
| Senator | Party |
| Representative | Party |
| Representative's Opponent | Party |

Length of term:

Senator
Representative

Naming:

President of Soviet Union
Capital of Nicaragua
Two countries that border Lebanon

Public Affairs Newspaper alpha = .63 (4 items)

How often do you read (FREQUENTLY, SOMETIMES, RARELY or NEVER):

International News
National Affairs News
Editorials
Local Affairs News

Public Affairs Television alpha = .50 (3 items)

How often do you watch (FREQUENTLY, SOMETIMES, RARELY or NEVER):

National news
Local news
Magazine shows and Documentaries

Attention to Newspapers

When you read the following kinds of stories how much attention do you pay to them (CLOSE ATTENTION, SOME ATTENTION, LITTLE ATTENTION):

National government and Politics
The presidential campaign

Attention to Television

When you see these on televison, how much attention do you pay to them (CLOSE ATTENTION, SOME ATTENTION, LITTLE ATTENTION):

National government and politics
The presidential campaign